



The Night the Reindeer Flew

and other Legends of Christmas

by
Emmett O. Saunders III

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Story</i>	<i>Page</i>
The Night The Reindeer Flew (1978)	3
The Shepherd's Wife (1993)	7
A Wish for Santa (1994)	10
Santa and the Angel (1995)	14
Santa and the Snow Goose (1996)	18
Santa and the Ice Princess (1997)	22
Santa and the Snowman (1998)	25
Santa and the Snow Kitten (1999)	30
Santa and the Sleigh Bells (2000)	36
Santa and the Fire Engine (2001)	39
Santa and the Snow Birds (2002)	42
Santa and the Christmas Flower (2003)	46
Santa and the Christmas Wreath (2004)	51





THE NIGHT THE REINDEER FLEW

by Emmett O. Saunders III
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A long, long time ago, before the very first celebration of Christmas, there lived a man by the name of Nicholas. Now Nicholas was a happy young man and lived in a little village close to the North Pole. And every year, on the eve of December the twenty-fifth, he would ride in a small sleigh drawn by eight tiny reindeer up and down the snow-covered streets of the little village, delivering gifts to all the good children.

The gifts weren't very costly, because Nicholas was only a poor toy-maker, and he couldn't afford the materials needed to build expensive presents for so many children. But an eye missing from a teddy bear or a toothless grin from a baby doll only made the gifts more special since they were made by the good saint.

And indeed, Nicholas was a saint, judging from the smiles and laughter that greeted him on the morning of December the twenty-fifth every year.

Why did he choose the eve of December twenty-fifth to deliver gifts? Well, where he lived, the shortest day of the year was December the twenty-first and he was able to go home early from work on this day. When he arrived home, Nicholas would immediately begin to prepare gifts for all the good children in the village. And it always took him exactly three days to prepare the gifts because every village child remained good for the whole year.

However, one afternoon three days before the twenty-fifth, Nicholas was on his way home from work when he was stopped on the street by a very old man. The old man's clothes were tattered and torn, but his wrinkled face smiled cheerfully in the cold December wind.

"Hello, Nicholas," the old man said slowly, "I've come a long way to see you."

"Do I know you?" Nicholas asked the old man wonderingly. "You do look a bit familiar. Have we met somewhere before?"

"I don't think so, the old man said thoughtfully. "But I've heard of your kindness to children from a great many people."

"Well, if there's anything that I can do for you, at any time, just let me know," Nicholas smiled pleasantly and started to leave.

But just then the old man put his hand on Nicholas' shoulder and looked deeply into the good saint's eyes.

"I know you're in a hurry," the old man smiled knowingly. "You only have three days in which to make all of the toys for the village children, but please give me just one minute more."

"Of course," Nicholas waited for him to continue.

"My son will be born in three days, and I'd like for him to have something special for his



birthday."

"I'd be delighted to give him something," Nicholas replied. His mind began to race over a million different gifts that he could fashion for a newborn infant.

"But I must tell you that his birthplace is far to the south of this little village," the old man's eyes twinkled in the afternoon sun, "And it would be a great trip covering many miles."

"If it's possible, sir, I'll be glad to visit him after I've delivered the rest of my gifts," Nicholas assured him.

"Oh no, no," the old man said hurriedly, "You must visit him first, not last."

"But what about the other children?" Nicholas began to despair. "What if I couldn't make it back in time to deliver their presents before morning?"

"Anything is possible if you want to do it," the old man said as he pressed a tiny wooden object into Nicholas' hand.

With this, the old man turned and hurried off down the street as snowflakes began to fall.

Nicholas watched the departing figure with interest until he was lost to sight. Then Nicholas remembered the wooden object in his hand and glanced down at it.

The object was a small wooden star which had been carved with the utmost care. Its five points were rounded at the tips and smooth along their edges, but the amazing thing about the star was its size. It was no bigger than the palm of his hand, and Nicholas couldn't feel the weight of the star. It seemed extremely light for a piece of wood.

Still, Nicholas smiled at the thought of the newborn infant's first gift, and he started the short walk to his front door. Upon entering his cottage, Nicholas suddenly realized that the old man had forgotten to say how far south to travel.

"Oh well," Nicholas thought to himself, "Maybe he'll come back to tell me before the twenty-fourth."

So, he began to work as he did every year on the dozen or so toys for the children in the village. Two days passed and there was still no word from the old man.

Luckily, Nicholas managed to finish all of the toys in plenty of time that year in order to check his list twice and make sure that no good child had been overlooked. Then, he set out to inquire if anyone in the village had seen how far the old man had traveled. But no one could remember having seen an old man enter or leave the village.

So, by late afternoon, Nicholas began loading the little sleigh with toys, feeling quite sad that he couldn't deliver the baby's small wooden gift. After hitching the eight tiny reindeer to the sleigh, Nicholas went back inside his cottage, however, and picked up the small star.

"I could at least try to deliver it first as long as the journey isn't too far," he thought





cheerfully.

He headed the little sleigh past the brightly lit windows of his neighbors and out onto the snow-covered road leading southward. There was a crossroads about two miles farther ahead and he felt that perhaps the old man might be waiting there to show him the way.

The muffled sound of the reindeer's hoofbeats helped to calm his rising fear about the passage of time. He mustn't be gone too long on his errand, otherwise the village children would be heartbroken in the morning to discover that he'd missed his visit. But the rays of the afternoon sun began to dwindle slowly away as the signpost at the crossroads appeared in the distance.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anyone waiting there for me," Nicholas noted sadly. "I might as well start for home."

But as he reached for the reins to turn the reindeer around, a figure half-hidden in the swirling snow waved to him. His face began to beam as Nicholas recognized the old man of several days before. However, as he spurred the little reindeer towards the figure in the distance, the old man pointed his hand upward into the air.

"That's odd," Nicholas thought. "It's almost as if ..."

But he never finished his thought as first one, then another, of the little reindeer started to pick up speed and, carrying along the small sleigh, they rose into the cold night air before Nicholas' astonished eyes.

Up over the neighboring village's housetops, up over the tallest trees, and then over the highest mountains, the small sleigh flew with its sole passenger and eight tiny reindeer. It flew across miles of land in a mere instant and then over lakes twice as wide as any Nicholas had ever seen before.

In only a few moments' time, he could look down and see an entire sea beneath him and then it was gone. And in another moment he was flying over a little town that looked surprisingly like his own.

The familiar surroundings made him think of his first meeting with the old man and all of the amazing things that had happened since then. And, it occurred to him that he still had the small wooden star in his bag of toys, so he drew it out to look at it again. But it had grown and was now twice as large as his hand!

He wondered aloud at this remarkable discovery, but was dismayed the next moment when the star burst into flames due to the sleigh's incredible rate of traveling speed. Not wanting to endanger the safety of the other toys, Nicholas let the flaming star fall over the side of the sleigh. But it fell only a short distance and then hung motionless in the dark December sky.

And, as the reindeer turned for home, Nicholas could see that the star had grown to a flaming





beacon in the sky overlooking a dimly lit wooden stable far below the flying sleigh.

“It must have been the baby’s home,” he thought smiling to himself. “And I may just make it back in time to deliver the rest of the presents before morning!”

Nicholas did deliver the rest of his gifts that same night and for many years afterward with the aid of his eight flying reindeer.

But he never forgot the first night the reindeer flew, nor his feeling of joy at having delivered the Christ Child’s first gift on Christmas Eve.





THE SHEPHERD'S WIFE

by Emmett O. Saunders III
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A long time ago, there lived a man named Jacob who tended his flock of sheep in the hills near Bethlehem. The shepherd had married a wonderful woman called Rebekkah at a young age and as husband and wife, they had enjoyed many happy years together.

But one day the strangest, most wonderful event occurred. Rebekkah was busily gathering her woven blankets for sale in the market when glancing up, she saw a tired couple passing by her door. A blonde, delicately featured woman, heavy with child, rode the back of a donkey. Her husband, a weather-worn travelling companion, strongly held the animal in check. The dark-haired man guided them toward the town, only a distant mile away.

Seeing the expectant mother, Rebekkah thought of the joy a child would bring to their family. Before she had a chance to greet them, though, they had moved on, anxious to reach safety before nightfall.

Regretfully, the shepherd's wife had her own concerns and she continued selecting the soft, lamb's wool coverings to exchange for bread. Just as the last small blanket had been collected, Jacob appeared at the window.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" she asked, curious at the change in his schedule.

"My flock fell into a deep ravine," Jacob replied. "We no longer have a way to earn enough to live."

"I still have blankets," she pointed out. "At least we will have food to get started again."

"It would take too long to gain back what we have lost," he said sadly. "I will look for any work in town."

Her husband turned and headed away down the dusty road.

"He loves tending sheep," she thought, hurrying after him, "There must be other means to gain another flock."

Together they walked the distance, separating only at the marketplace. Agreeing to meet again at dusk, she left him to visit with friends and seek out a new job. Moving through the afternoon sun were people of every age and background. Surely someone would have gainful employment for Jacob. She held the thought firmly in mind as once again the tired family and donkey she had seen earlier wandered into view.

They moved from one inn to another, vainly trying to find shelter, but being refused at every turn. A thought of offering them her own home entered her head. But before she could get across the wide street, a vendor began offering her money for blankets. And when she turned back, the young couple had vanished again.



Concluding her business at the end of the day, Rebekkah headed for her arranged meeting place with Jacob. Night had fallen swiftly and a cold wind had settled itself in Bethlehem. No one normally ventured out in the dangers of darkness. But on a hill overlooking the town, she saw the shadowy outlines of three camels bearing what appeared to be kings or astrologers. They moved ever closer in a straight line and downward toward a stable in the distance.

She wrapped a cloak tightly around her to keep out the night air, then jumped slightly when Jacob suddenly appeared close by.

“Have you found work?” Rebekkah wondered.

“Not yet,” his voice sounded grimly.

The threat of eventual starvation loomed large in their minds. Work was hard to come by, and prospects were few this time of year.

“Can you wait alone a few more minutes?” he asked, afraid to leave her. “There’s one more place to try.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “Do what you must and I’ll be waiting.”

Reluctantly, they parted. He headed to the farthest end of town. Rebekkah watched him go, then decided on visiting the three kings’ destination. A bright star hung in the heavens above the wooden stable and as she approached, a warm glow filled her heart.

“How can this be?” she thought silently. “It is the coldest night of the year. Yet, I feel no need for this heavy cloak.”

Drawing closer to the brightly-lit shelter, a short gasp of surprise escaped her. The man and woman she had twice seen pass that day now were surrounded by comforting animals and royalty. The distant visitors, arrayed in fine silks, knelt in humble adoration beside a wooden crib. It had been hastily but finely assembled by a master craftsman. Rebekkah had seen such work only once before in a larger town far to the south. The woman’s husband must be a wonderful carpenter, she thought. How could such talent be used in so humble a setting? Then the child opened his eyes and looked at her. She instantly realized the innocence that had drawn forth the response for protection and worship.

Feeling the need to contribute something to celebrate the newborn infant’s birth, Rebekkah held forth the last of her trading wares. A thin, tightly-knit blanket, finer than any she’d ever woven still remained in her possession. No one had offered anything for it, believing the quality to be too high for purchase. The covering would have bought her family one more day’s survival in the harsh economic times that faced them. Yet, she held it forth freely to the woman in wonder and love for her son.

The young mother smiled gently at her and accepted the extended gift gratefully. Her baby’s





fingers played with the covering as it warmly sheltered him from the cold. Rebekkah quietly wished them a good life, then left to rejoin Jacob.

At the outskirts of Bethlehem, his eager smile met her own. He had found work tending another man's flock, and would begin tomorrow. She glanced back toward the small stable. The little child lying in a manger had returned a shepherd wife's gift in hope, for love.





A WISH FOR SANTA

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1994

Snow fell gently as Nicholas packed the last toy aboard his sleigh. Evening crept slowly over fog-covered hills in the distance. But he no longer feared night's approach in the small village. Or the almost impossible task of delivering a bundle of toys to children around the countryside.

Many years had passed since his sleigh and reindeer had first flown by the power of a mysterious stranger. And ever since then, each December twenty-fourth, his aerial trip grew wider, covering more and more miles. Bringing gifts to even greater numbers of children who had managed to stay good the whole year through.

Nicholas could no longer remember exactly how many presents to deliver each Christmas Eve. Or the name of every smiling face that glowed with delight the following morning. But, in his heart, he felt the innermost love of a family and added another gift to his list.

Just as his neighbors began eating dinner inside warmly-lit homes, Nicholas headed down the road leading to the hills. No one ventured out for too long after dark in the cold northern village. But his almost white beard and thick red cloak kept any hint of arctic wind at bay.

Gently he called to the reindeer who began picking up speed, then swiftly launched into their journey by air. Yet this year, the sleigh seemed heavier and covered only a few miles before brushing the top of a large house. Donner and Blitzen, the lead reindeer, lost speed and landed in a hard snowbank.

“Here now,” Nicholas called in the silence. “What’s going on up there?”

There was no answer as the gift-filled sleigh turned over, throwing every toy across icy ground. A shout of surprise escaped him as Nicholas followed the toys into the snow.

A side door of the house flew open quickly and a young woman approached. Her soft footsteps crunched against the frozen ground. The lady’s eyes sparkled merrily at the overturned sleigh and exasperated passenger.

“Are you all right?” her voice sounded like a small church bell pealing immense concern despite its size.

“I’m fine,” Nicholas replied. “But I’m afraid my packages are ruined.”

“Now, don’t be despairing so easily,” she chided, helping him to his feet. “Let’s see what’s survived the tumble.”

Together, they righted the sleigh and began sorting broken toys into a separate stack. Wooden toys and gadgets lay completely destroyed, splintered into hundreds of pieces. Dolls, teddy bears and smaller items were missing parts of every description.

But in only minutes, the two snow-laden workers finished their task, then headed back to the





house.

“Come on in,” the young woman smiled. “I have a pan of hot chocolate on the stove and cookies in the oven.”

“You’re very kind, Miss,” the good saint replied.

“My name is Catherine,” she smiled back. “And yours?”

“Nicholas,” he grinned, despite the predicament.

“Well, jolly Nicholas,” her eyes glowed as she prepared his snack, “I think it’s time we called in some reinforcements.”

“What do you mean?” the young man’s surprised expression grew wider as she swung open a hallway door and thirty small faces dashed into the kitchen.

“It’s time you met my family,” Catherine smiled. “And believe me, they’re more help than you’ll ever need.”

“I’m amazed!” he wondered aloud. “How do you manage a household this size?”

“It’s easy,” she explained, “When everyone helps out.”

Turning to the bag of broken toys, her hand barely had time to indicate the task before the children vanished with it into the hallway. Then, Catherine seated herself beside Nicholas at the table.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “They will have everything repaired in a very short time.”

“And they all live here with you?” he asked admiringly. This woman seemed to be full of surprises.

“Yes,” Catherine nibbled diligently on a cookie. “They have nowhere else to go. They’re all orphans.”

“Your compassion is outstanding,” Nicholas patted her hand. “And I’m impressed.”

“Oh, I’ve heard quite a bit about your own,” she returned. “Your wife must be very proud.”

“I’m not married,” he said, finishing the last of his hot chocolate, “and never really thought about it ... until now.”

“Well, whoever the lucky lady turns out to be,” Catherine smiled, “will certainly be getting a saint for a husband.”

Just then, a young voice could be heard from the hallway, mimicking the new word that had never been heard.

“Santa ...”

“Come on in, little elf,” Catherine called softly to the little boy who peered around the corner of the door.

He entered cautiously. But was instantly joined by the other children who had repaired every





toy to its original condition. Nicholas' eyes grew wide at the astounding job in so short a time.

"How did they manage this?" he asked, kneeling beside the children. "It's impossible!"

"They work very hard," she tried to explain.

"Yes, but ..." Nicholas began, but was cut short by her look of concern.

"You have your sleigh and reindeer," Catherine nodded back understandingly, "and I have my elves."

"Agreed," he accepted the explanation without any further questions.

"And now we need to get everything back in the sleigh, children," her request followed their departure. They were already racing to get everything loaded back in place.

"But I still won't be able to fly with this load," Nicholas sat back down. "The weight is simply too much for the reindeer to pull."

"Nothing's impossible," she replied, deep in thought. "Wait here a moment. I might have just the thing."

She hurried down the hallway only to return quickly with a large worn blanket. Its tattered edges had been frayed by years of wear, but the fabric remained undamaged and sturdy. He accepted it gratefully, running his hands over the cloth.

"It's certainly large enough to hold a few things," he acknowledged.

"It will hold everything," the young woman assured him.

"I couldn't possibly accept this," Nicholas protested. "Heirlooms shouldn't be given away."

"Your journeys will be long and far," Catherine explained soothingly. "And this blanket once wrapped a small infant who showed up in a basket on my doorstep. His mother claimed him the very next day and never explained why he'd been left in the first place. But I've always felt she left the blanket for another reason. And now I understand completely. It was intended for you."

Nicholas walked with her back to the sleigh. It was once more heavily laden and he gingerly began placing the items within the blanket. One after another of the gifts disappeared into the depths of the fabric and amazingly the entire load became lighter with each item. Finally, when all had been gathered in, his curiosity got the better of him.

"Did the woman ever mention where this blanket came from?" he asked.

"From a shepherd's wife," Catherine replied.

Nicholas nodded and laying a finger aside of his nose to keep the scent of compassion close to him, he bade her farewell. Catherine leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Go now and deliver all these gifts," she patted his gloved hand gently. "The children are waiting. And I will too, for your return."

Nicholas hugged her, then climbed aboard his sleigh for the second time that evening. And as the





reindeer climbed skyward, he knew she would be patiently waiting, as she had this night, through all the years ahead.





SANTA AND THE ANGEL

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1995

Annie Marshall could barely hold back a smile as she watched the snow falling steadily outside her fourth grade classroom window. The principal had already announced school closing early at 3:00 p.m. and everyone was merely waiting for the buses to pull up out front. Except for Annie.

She and her brother, Ethan, a first grader, always walked the short distance from the schoolyard to their home in the Chicago suburb. Snow meant little delay as Ethan continually ran ahead, keeping both children on a steady homebound path. Their mother, Janice, would normally meet them at the door with a light snack to tide them over till dinner. And every evening their father, Mark, read over the next day's school assignments. Making sure each child paid close attention to his or her studies. Little time was left for imagination except for the Christmas season.

Then, both parents enjoyed the holidays through the eyes of their children. Days spent shopping and being part of the wonderful spirit of giving kept each family member in touch with Santa's own basic gift.

Her mother always stressed the importance of looking out for other people. Not just at Christmas time, though. Ethan's welfare became Annie's responsibility once they left the house. And sometimes, just once in awhile, she wished for freedom from her duty. Today was one of those times.

"Everybody's going over to Theresa's house when we leave," Sharlie Richards, a close friend, chided. "Why don't you come along?"

"Can't," Annie made a face resembling her little brother's grin, "I gotta take Ethan home."

"He can't get there by himself?" Sharlie smirked back. "Geez, you'd think a kid his age could find his way home. It's not like you don't walk it every day."

"Sure he could," Annie replied, "but Mom doesn't like him wandering alone. Anything's possible between here and home. Remember last week when that guy tried picking up Tracy Reynolds in his car? Mrs. Dodgion told us to report anything like that to the principal."

"Nothing happened to Tracy."

"No, but it could have. And that's why I can't let Ethan go by himself."

"He's a baby," Sharlie stuck her tongue out. "And so are you. But we'll have a good time at Theresa's. Her mom fixes hot chocolate after sledding."

"Have a good time, then," Annie kept her temper in check for the moment. "Maybe there won't be that much snow."



“Two days before Christmas?” Sharlie whispered as the bell ran for dismissal. “They said it’d be a blizzard on the radio this morning.”

“Guess I’ll catch you when we get back.”

“See ya,” Sharlie headed out with several other classmates.

Annie almost gathered her books together before Mrs. Dodgion’s shadow fell over the desk.

The schoolteacher noted the pupil’s concern at not joining her friends.

“You’re not going with them?”

“Can’t. Mom said I need to take Ethan home every day from school. So he won’t get lost.”

“Or hurt,” Mrs. Dodgion reminded her. “Mothers can be persistent at times.”

“Oh, I know it’s safer for Ethan,” Annie agreed. “But it would have been nice to go sledding.”

“Look at it this way, dear,” the schoolteacher helped button Annie’s coat. “There will be plenty of other times to enjoy with your friends. And they change over the years. But your brother is family and Ethan will always be there when your other friends are long gone.”

“That’s right,” Annie smiled. “I better catch up with him.”

“Was he waiting for you?”

“No, we leave together.”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Dodgion tapped her lips thoughtfully. “I’d better check, but I think the lower grades got out early. To give them more time to get home before the worst of the storm hits.”

“How long ago did they leave?” Annie’s smile turned to a frown.

“I don’t know. Maybe a half hour,” the schoolteacher turned and headed for the door. “Wait right here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Annie’s eyes widened in shock as she stared out at the faster, ever-swirling snowflakes. Ethan could be already wandering helplessly lost in the gathering storm. Slinging a knapsack of books over her shoulder, she ran down the hall and out the nearest exit.

Janice Richards gently replaced the phone receiver on its hook. The school’s reception desk had been jammed for over twenty minutes with calls from concerned parents. No one could confirm the closing time until her last call. Then, the connection had been broken almost immediately to answer another concerned mother’s request for information.

Mark had called several times for updates, but he wouldn’t be off from work until 6:00 o’clock. Television weather reports kept up with the storm’s increasing intensity. But nothing changed the fact that Annie and Ethan were probably already on their way in one of the worst snowstorms in years.

“Please let my children be safe,” she prayed, watching the whirling snowflakes blanket the





street.

A small flicker of light pressed against the window for only a second as she turned away toward the phone. Thinking it might be a car pulling into the drive, she turned back. Maybe it was someone bringing her children home.

But no one was there. The silent snowfall continued.

High overhead the little light sped northward. In a twinkling it covered thousands of miles. Then descended to a warmly lit home at the North Pole. An older-aged woman stood at the kitchen door, watching her husband patiently feeding a red-nosed reindeer.

“Kris,” she called softly. “We have a visitor.”

“And who would that be, Catherine?” the red-suited man turned to smile back at her. “Time’s getting short. We don’t have any to spare for long visits.”

“I don’t think you’d want to miss this one,” Mrs. Claus joined him as the light sparkled brightly into the shape of an angel.

“No, I suppose not,” Kris agreed. “What brings you here, little messenger?”

The small angel flew gently beside his ear, whispering in a flurry of sounds that Mrs. Claus didn’t recognize. One moment, she heard a gentle breeze blowing against the surf of an ocean shoreline. In the next, the steady cry of a hawk demanding his attention. There was no malice in the message, she understood that. But whatever was wrong definitely needed a quick response. His worried frown assured Catherine of that.

“All right, it will be my gift to them this Christmas, then,” Santa blew a small kiss to the angel as she spun back into light and vanished upward.

“I will be back in time for dinner.” he assured his wife.

“Be careful,” she replied, concerned for him and the matter that drew him away from his regular schedule.

“I will,” he promised and placed a finger beside his nose nodding once. The familiar red suit glowed brighter than Rudolph’s nose, then dimmed from sight carrying him away into the dark night.

Sparkles of red and white snowflakes glittered silently in the wake of her husband’s departure.

“Be safe, my love,” Catherine whispered.

Ethan’s frozen breath shot from chapped lips as he called out helplessly, wandering farther down the neighborhood street. Swirling snow bombarded him from all directions.

“I’m lost,” his voice echoed faintly in the blanket of white flakes. “Help, please!”

“No problem,” a hearty voice sounded close. “We’ll have you home in no time.”





Ethan stood still, his heart beating wildly. Who was the stranger? And could he trust him? The boy's eyes searched the snow-clad figure for some sign of friendship.

The man appeared to be a rather short elfin figure dressed in red cloak and pants. A large black belt and silver buckle kept cold wind and weather securely out. His chubby cheeks glistened as snowflakes melted across his soft white beard.

“Ethan, you asked for help and I came.”

“Can you get me home?”

“Certainly. But Annie's out looking for you as well.”

“How do you know that?”

“I'm Santa Claus. I know where children are all over the world.”

“How'd you find me?”

“Your mother sent me a message. She's very worried about you.”

“Please, send me home.”

“That, I will,” Santa pointed off in the distance. “Go back this way and turn left at the corner. Your sister's already there waiting.”

“Thanks, Santa,” Ethan hugged the old man gently and plodded quickly down the snow-covered sidewalk.

A gentle wind opened a small patch in the curtain of flakes as brother and sister met at the street corner. Annie hugged Ethan tightly.

“I was so worried about you,” she said, grabbing his hand tightly in hers.

“So's Mom,” he replied.

“You've talked to her?”

“No, but Santa has,” Ethan grinned, pointing back up the sidewalk.

“There's no one there,” Annie insisted, staring bleakly into the snowstorm.

“Sure he is,” Ethan waved his hand at the elfin figure and small light that shone beside Santa's ear.

Annie stared hard for a moment and a smile spread over her face. A familiar red suit was glowing gently in the distance. And St. Nicholas, listening with love to another angel, smiled back.





SANTA AND THE SNOW GOOSE

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1996

A cold brisk December wind rattled the shutters as Mrs. Claus handed Santa a bowl of steaming soup. His ruddy face stared back at her in the crackling firelight as dark breezes whistled down the chimney.

“You need to get that flue checked before leaving tonight,” she pointed at the flaming embers in the fireplace, “One of those could catch this whole house ablaze and then where would the elves and I be?”

“Now, Martha,” Santa grinned back. “You know nothing like that could ever happen here. I check the chimney every year in the fall. There’s no chance ...”

“Nicholas, did you check it last month?” she interrupted him quickly.

“Well, no,” he admitted goodnaturedly. “Donner and Blitzen needed that extra training for landing on new houses added to the list.”

“Or the month before?” Mrs. Claus gently chided.

“No,” Santa raised his eyebrows quizzically. “That would have been too early. And you know how things pile up at the last minute around here.”

“All the more reason,” Martha handed her husband a tall glass of milk and four homemade cookies for dessert, “to be looking after it before you go.”

“You win,” he agreed. “I’ll see to it. Promise!”

Chomping away at the cookies, he suddenly noticed a small winged bird landing harshly in snow outside the front window. His worried frown drew Mrs. Claus’ attention and she hurried to the door.

“Oh dear, the poor creature’s half frozen.”

“Bring it inside,” Santa decided as he rose to help.

The unexpected arrival had brought several elves from the stables, all wanting to assist. And so, together, the small bird was carried and laid on a warm rug by the fireplace.

“Get some blankets,” Mrs. Claus requested.

But before her helpers could return, the bird rose slowly to its feet. gingerly looking around, the aviator bowed low to its rescuers.

“Can it speak?” Martha asked her husband, not knowing the extent of his generosity at granting such a request. But she knew the same power that lifted his sleigh and reindeer into the night sky every year on December the twenty-fourth was immense. And more than likely, unlimited in bestowing such a small gift to straighten out matters for the wounded animal.

“Why, of course,” Nicholas replied winking at the goose, “and tell us exactly what brought



him so far north. Isn't that right?"

The bird's eyes widened as his throat cleared.

"I can speak," he said, ruffling his feathers.

"Yes, you can," Santa smiled at him, "Are you warm enough?"

"Quite," he grinned back through his beak. "And many thanks for taking me in on such a cold night."

"We're glad to help," Mrs. Claus chimed in. "The weather simply isn't cooperating at all this year."

"That's what I came to tell you," the goose said, nodding his head toward the window. "I passed the North Wind on its way to greet you, but it was lost."

"Lost?" Santa's puzzled frown tightened his ruddy cheeks. "How could the North Wind be lost? It always blows from North to South. The South Wind blows just the opposite."

"Well, I don't know, Santa," the goose shrugged its small shoulders. "But something needs to be done and quickly. If you don't have the North Wind at your back ..."

"I'll never be able to lift off," Santa agreed with the bird's thought. "I'd be fighting the North Wind all the way around the world."

"What could have caused such a thing?" Mrs Claus wondered. "The North Wind hasn't lost its direction since time began."

"There is one possibility," Santa tapped a finger aside his nose and vanished instantly.

"Where'd he go?" the goose's eyes widened in shock..

Mrs. Claus bundled the bird tighter in a light shawl as she dried its feathers.

"No telling," she replied. "But he will return with the answer. Of that, I'm certain."

* * *

Santa scratched his head in disbelief. The cold North Wind surrounding him stretched long icy fingers high into the night sky. A clear, starless expanse soared above as the saint's hand waved a greeting.

"Old friend, are you well?"

"No," the Wind whistled back. "I'm not!"

"What's wrong?" Santa seated himself against the base of a darkened tree stump. "Why are you here in the middle of a woods instead of blowing your appointed rounds?"

"I have traveled the same path for many centuries," the Wind agreed, "but tonight was different. I couldn't travel the same path, and remain your friend."

"I don't understand," Santa's red gloved hand lit his pipe.

"There," a gust from the Wind blew gently and turned the small flare into a bright beacon for





an instant. "Do you see how easily your pipe can be lit by such a small breath from me?"

"You have great strength," Santa nodded, "and can do mighty things with that power."

The Wind smiled and circled the red-suited elf. White fur trim rustled softly in the breeze.

"You are right. I can bend the tallest trees, change the course of the fastest river, and gently pat the back of a newborn kitten. Yet, I could never bring myself to intentionally harm a living thing."

"But many blame you for cold weather and its accompanying ailments," Nicholas remarked, tapping out his pipe.

"Just as they would cease to believe in you when the holidays aren't as joyous as past celebrations," the Wind replied.

"And you have nothing more to do with changing temperatures than I do with people's enjoyment of the Christmas season. I simply remind them of the best that lies within themselves," Santa rose to his feet. "They must find it in their own hearts to reach out to others in need. In the small time that is allotted to me each year, my work in the air is just as important as what goes on in here."

He tapped his heart meaningfully. The Wind sighed and nodded.

"I know. And that's why I could not make my appointed rounds tonight."

"You mentioned that," the elderly elf smiled. "Why don't you tell me why, ... now?"

"Your chimney wasn't cleaned in the fall," the cold air whistled back. "And if I had passed your way, a very large fire would have started inside the bricks. That could have wiped out your entire workshop, not to mention Mrs. Claus' house. That's why I changed course."

Santa's eyes widened realizing one of the most powerful forces on earth had changed its natural course for him. The wind was indeed a true friend.

"Mrs. Claus warned me of that tonight," the red hand rose as Santa lay his finger aside his nose. "I thank you, dearest of friends. And I will make every effort to change it immediately."

The North Wind smiled back and rose eagerly into the night sky.

* * *

The sleigh was piled high as Santa reappeared in front of the fireplace. Martha greeted him with a quick kiss and pointed to the open doorway.

"Your sleigh's ready," her voice flowed with the music of a crystal stream in his ears. Santa always ad-mired her patience, waiting for his ap-pointed rounds to be completed.

"I know, dear," Nicholas replied and reached for the chimney broom. "Let me just get that chimney taken care of first."

"No problem, Santa," the workshop's head elf, Ellis, pointed to the door. "We've already





cleaned it. That's our job. Yours waits outside."

"The children are expecting you," Mrs. Claus reminded him.

"Well, thank you, one and all," Santa patted the elf's head. "I do appreciate everyone's help. And I promise you, we'll get that chimney cleaned early next fall."

He hugged Martha, then, and headed out into the snow. The crunch of ice under his feet echoed far in the quiet darkness. As he seated himself amid the toys, Santa checked the reindeer, cheering them on for the flight ahead.

"Donner, get back in line, please," he warned the frisky youngster. "Everybody has to be straight in line for liftoff."

"I don't think there will be one tonight," Donner replied. "Unless you know something we don't."

"What do you mean?" Nicholas frowned slightly. "Is Rudolph ill?"

"No, Santa, I'm here," Rudolph replied. His nose lit up at the sound of his voice from Santa's lips.

All the other reindeer squinted in the glare of the brightest beacon of the night sky.

"Hey, Rudolph, tone it down," Dasher begged.

"No problem," Rudolph grinned and lowered the glare.

"What is it then?" Santa asked Donner.

"There's no wind," the reindeer returned, pawing nervously. "Without it, we don't get off the ground."

"Oh no," Nicholas groaned. "I forgot to tell the North Wind which way to blow toward."

"Then you're stuck?" Mrs. Claus wondered.

"I suppose so," Santa admitted.

"No, wait!" a small voice sounded behind them.

The snow goose, recovered from its rough landing and nursed gently back to health, stepped toward the sleigh.

"I always fly south in the fall. If the North Wind is watching, maybe he can follow my path in the sky."

With that, the bird rose swiftly, soaring overhead and turning southward.

Almost instantly the strong North Wind blew hard against the snow, and Santa grinned at Mrs. Claus. Her eyes followed him and she waved as the sleigh began pulling away.

The reindeers' hooves beat a steady rhythm into the swirling wind and blowing snow. Then, sparkling stars surrounded them as Santa and the reindeer rose into the sky, following the path of the snow goose through the heavens.





SANTA AND THE ICE PRINCESS

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1997

Snow crunched softly in the forest as Comet and Cupid landed near Santa's workshop. Flakes of frozen white crystals blanketed both flying reindeer as they stood watching smoke curl from the cottage's chimney. The swirling white sky around them seemed to lie quietly listening as faint peals of laughter surfaced from the hard-working elves.

"I don't think they'll finish on time this year," Comet remarked, pawing nervously at the ice carpet beneath his hooves.

"Oh, they'll be done in plenty of time," Cupid replied, "love finds a way."

Comet's smirk of amusement caught Cupid off guard.

"You're always basing everything on love," Comet shook himself, freeing a flurry of snowflakes from his back. "When you're older I guess that's the best philosophy."

"It's the only way to look at things," Cupid snapped back gently, "whether you're young or old."

"I suppose there's a reason for that?" Comet snorted, exhaling a gust of steamy breath in the cold air.

"There is indeed," Cupid smiled. "Have you ever heard the story of the Ice Princess?"

Comet thought hard for a moment, but was forced to shake his head no.

"Then listen," Cupid began, "and perhaps you'll see why we're here."

* * * * *

A very long time ago, not far from the North Pole, there lived a beautiful young princess named Icela. She had golden-spun hair, cut short to keep the frost from tangling it in the wind. And her sparkling blue eyes never missed anything. They noticed the smallest change in nature's routine.

Ice patterns in the branches of the tallest trees couldn't be wind blown into new shapes without her seeing the change. Isolated as she was in her frozen world, everything remaining the same became commonplace. And the basis for her favorite declaration of "exactly so" as days passed with nothing new added to notice.

Nobody knew how she came to live in her castle nestled in the midst of huge mountains overlooking a crystal clear lake. But every day Icela would journey down the wandering path to visit that lake and desperately seek any changes to the horizon.

Her only limits for exploring was the distance back to the castle. Because every evening the night sky afforded little light except the North Star and its faint twinkling counterparts for guidance. And being lost in a cover of darkness, snowflakes and cold wind was her biggest fear.



However, one late afternoon beside the lake a thin frail voice in the distance caught her ear.

“Please, help me!”

A sudden blustery gust of snowflakes blinded her for a moment. But as her vision cleared, she saw a small black and white bird stuck in an ice hole by the water’s edge. The penguin’s webbed feet paddled uselessly beneath the surface as coal-colored wings beat the ice shackles binding it between air and water. Icela ran immediately to help free the trapped bird.

“How did you get stuck?” she asked, scratching at the foot-thick ice surrounding its belly.

“I wandered away when my mom and dad weren’t looking,” the little penguin’s eyes began to fill with tears. “I was tired of following them around all day. I wanted to see something new and different.”

“Well, with their guidance you could have easily seen all sorts of new things,” Icela replied, twisting the small bird first one way, then the other. “the world has a lot to offer, but not when you’re stuck in one place like this.”

“You’re right,” the little bird sobbed, “and now it’s too late. I’ll die here in the cold all alone.”

The princess smiled, releasing from her shoulders a thick white cloak she wore for protection against the bitter weather.

“Here, penguin,” she said, nestling the young bird within its folds. “This will keep you warm until I can get you free.”

“Oh no,” the penguin tried to prevent her from sheltering his shivering small body. “You’ll freeze if you try saving me with this. And the sun’s going down. You need to start for home.”

Icela glanced nervously at the sky, noting the ominous snowstorm clouds overhead. They had begun to darken and with each passing moment, another minute of safe travel back to her castle was slipping away.

“No,” she determined aloud, “I won’t leave you here like this to perish in the cold.”

“Even if you die, too?” the penguin asked, its eyes beginning to glimmer with hope.

“I won’t leave you,” Icela assured him.

At that moment, the warm cloak began to shine and the ice gently cracked around the bird. Icela shouted with delight and pulled the penguin to safety from the widening hole.

As she gathered him in her arms, a red gloved hand patted her shoulder and drew the ice princess to her feet. Icela turned and saw the North Pole’s guardian looking deep into her eyes.

“Icela, you’ve done a great thing this day,” Santa said, lifting the bird from her arms.

Wrapping Icela’s new friend tightly inside, the good saint grasped both ends of the cloth and stretched it into the more familiar form of an elf. The little helper grinned and hugged her knees before disappearing into sparkles of light.





“Where did he go?” she asked quietly awed at the red-suited man’s handiwork.

“Back to my workshop,” Santa replied. “There’s plenty to do before Christmas Eve.”

“But why did you change him from a penguin to an elf?” Icela returned, “Are all your helpers actually birds of the air?”

“Oh my, no,” Santa laughed. “Penguins can’t fly, so he’d be of no use in scouting the world and telling me who’s been bad or good all year.”

“And the other birds?” the ice princess asked, kneeling to regain her cloak. “Are they actually elves in disguise?”

“That’s for me to know,” the white-bearded man answered. “And more importantly, it’s not what’s on the outside that counts … only the inside. Today, I’ve seen what’s in your heart, humanity beyond your years.”

“I did only what needed to be done,” Icela explained. “All my life things have been exactly so. Always in place. Never any change from the routine.”

“But in saving the penguin, you ignored your past. You were willing to die for a new-found friend,” Santa pointed out. “Never again will things be exactly so, or your heart live in fear of an icy night.”

He lifted the glowing white cloak from her hands. In his own, the snow-blown covering began shining brighter and brighter with every color of the rainbow. Pointing upward, the cloth sped into the dark night sky and grew in size to fill the horizon.

Icela stared in amazement at the huge curtain of colors shedding its northern light over the mountains surrounding her castle and lake.

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped in admiration.

“All travelers will find their way to your home from this day forward by the light of aurora borealis,” Santa grinned, “and know the warmth of humanity that dwells within the heart of an ice princess.”

“Thank you, Santa,” Icela whispered, no longer fearful as snowflakes fell around them in the darkness.

“Very nice remembrance,” Comet noted, as Cupid finished his story. “So why exactly are we here? You did promise to enlighten me on that point.”

Cupid grinned back at the older reindeer, nuzzling aside the last tree branch standing between them and Santa’s workshop.

“We’re here to make sure the love of humanity burns brightly in each heart, young or old, every Christmas.”





SANTA AND THE SNOWMAN

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1998

Sparkling taps of ice against Santa's workshop roof drew his attention toward a large window overlooking the North Pole. All the elves glanced at each other but no one paused in their work. Everyone knew the weather report had been calling for a bad ice storm to begin mid-day. But no one really expected it on Christmas Eve. There were too many toys and gifts to deliver.

Mrs. Claus had sent over a fresh supply of hot chocolate and cookies earlier. But the large Victorian cottage could barely be seen through the curtain of ice falling outside.

"Don't worry," Santa's cheery voice kept everyone focused on their task. "We'll get everything on the sleigh and hope for the best."

They had worked through breakfast and were eagerly awaiting lunch when a second weather update crackled over the radio.

"The storm's center has moved northward faster than predicted. The full force should hit close to midnight. We'll keep you updated as conditions change."

A red gloved hand snapped the volume dial to off. Santa rubbed his eyes wearily. There was no mistake. An ice storm would definitely delay his trip. It would be far too dangerous to try lifting off into the storm's full blown fury.

"What are we gonna do?" Bernie, one of the lead elves, asked. "Not much point in making all these toys if we can't get them delivered."

"We'll get them there," Santa assured him, pushing aside a holiday-decorated curtain. He stared at a faint rainbow of light flickering between the ice drops outside. "The ice princess will help us."

"Princess Icela?" Bernie shook his head in disbelief. "She never leaves her palace. Especially at night."

"That's all changed now," Santa smiled, remembering her brave rescue of an elf only a year earlier.

Disguised as a penguin, the little helper had been trapped in ice to test the beautiful princess' courage. She had selflessly agreed to stay with the bird rather than abandon it to the winter elements.

For reward, Santa changed her cloak to a shimmering beacon of color, lighting the night skies. Now, a ray of hope gleaned in the good saint's mind as the Aurora Borealis glimmered overhead.

"I'll be back in a flash," he assured them.

Merry eyes twinkled in the workshop's firelight as Santa placed a finger aside his nose. In an instant, the red-suited elf vanished in a blaze of flowing light.





* * *

"Welcome, Santa," Icela smiled as he appeared at her doorstep.

"You didn't even give me time to knock," the saint replied.

"You don't have to," the princess said, taking his hand. She led him quickly inside the palace, away from the prying ice drops that sought to dampen his warm red suit trimmed in white. "You know you're welcome anytime."

"You're too kind," Santa took an offered cup of hot cocoa.

"Nonsense," Icela shrugged off the compliment. "But tell me, what brings you out for a visit just hours away from delivering gifts?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, there's an ice storm outside," he replied, sipping slowly from the cup of hot chocolate. "We can't get airborne in a storm like this. All the toys would be ruined. And the reindeer could never find their way in such harsh weather. Even with Rudolph's nose to help."

"What can I do?" Icela's eyes widened in fear. She suddenly realized Santa had come to her for a solution. And she had none to offer. "I don't control the weather."

"Then there's nothing to be done," Nicholas frowned. She was his last hope. If the ice princess had no power to call off the storm, this year's Christmas would be cancelled.

"Wait!" the young girl's face broke into a smile. "I don't have the answer, but I know someone who might."

Santa listened intently as she outlined a path from his workshop to a long-forgotten friend's doorstep. Bidding her farewell, he hugged her and vanished once again in a sparkling spray of red light.

* * *

Nicholas' boots crunched in the icy snow path through the fir-laden forest. Bernie's fingers tugged at the red-suited man's knee.

"Hey, Santa, it's getting dark and we need to get back to finish the toys."

"Go then," the larger elf replied, patting his companion's head. "I'll be along shortly."

Bernie disappeared quickly as swirling ice flakes fell where he stood only moments before. Santa's thickly gloved hand stirred a flurry of snow at the entrance of an enormous hollow tree. It was an opening he'd found many years earlier.

Now the forgotten doorway had almost grown completely shut from not being used. Giving the secret knock he had learned from the tree's sole inhabitant, Santa waited patiently for familiar footsteps from below.

A moment later, two grey eyes, the color of smoke, greeted him warmly.





“Come on in, old friend,” a weathered hand pointed into a small hallway.

Santa followed the older man down a steep winding staircase below the snow covered surface.

A huge living area came into view as they descended.

“Thanks,” Nicholas replied. “I was afraid you wouldn’t be home.”

“On a night like this?” the friend’s eyebrows raised at the suggestion. “Where else would I be?”

“You are the forest guardian,” Santa admitted.

“True,” the old man smiled. “Or my name isn’t Jack Frost. But there’s no trouble in the woods, is there?”

“Not if we can lift off in this ice storm,” the large elf agreed. “But clearing tree tops when you can’t see the trees will be tricky. Especially with a sleigh full of toys and eight flying reindeer.”

“Is Rudolph sick?” Jack asked, seating himself in front of a large landscape painting. A frozen paint brush handle peeked out of an ice bucket beside the artwork.

Jack’s talent in younger years lay mainly in ice etchings on glass surfaces. Many people were reminded of fall’s change to winter when they viewed his handiwork on crisp freezing mornings. The admirers eventually became students and learned his craft well. Practicing every chance they could throughout most of the northern icy regions.

“Everything’s fine with the reindeer,” Nicholas replied as he accepted a plateful of chocolate chip cookies. “But we need a way through the storm.”

“What can I do?” Jack asked, truly concerned over his friend’s dilemma. “I’m just a painter.”

“Like I’m just a toymaker,” Santa grinned back.

“Let me think,” the painter’s grey eyes stared at his canvas.

Flurries of snowflakes covered the faintly painted outlines of Santa’s workshop and cottage. The ticking of a large wooden cuckoo clock seemed to magnify the precious seconds slipping by.

The frost painter’s fingers slowly picked up the ice brush and began blacking out a small hole at the edge of the picture.

“You see,” Jack’s voice came out as a whisper. “What you need, Nicholas, is something to block out the ice. Like this...”

The rounded hole suddenly fashioned itself into a slightly rumpled top hat. Not unlike those seen by a much younger Jack in early visits to big cities below the North Pole. Gentlemen had worn such hats then, round bowler types with wide brims.

Jack peeled the dark shape from the canvas and stretched it in his hands. Its two dimensional shape immediately popped open. He put it on Santa’s head, fitting it to him exactly.

“Thank you, my friend,” Nicholas stood to leave. “I’ve learned what I need to know.”





“Don’t stay away so long next time,” Jack waved as Santa laid a finger aside of his nose and vanished.

* * *

A burst of white snowdust sprang from the sleigh’s runners as the reindeer tugged impatiently at their delayed departure.

“Whoa, Rudolph,” Santa’s ruddy cheeks beamed almost as bright as the reindeer’s nose. “We have to wait for one more rider.”

“Another rider?” Mrs. Claus asked, shielding her face from the pelting ice.

In the few short hours her husband had been off visiting their neighbors, the storm’s center had arrived with high winds and blinding force.

It would be a miracle if the sleigh lifted off with just one passenger. She couldn’t imagine who else Santa meant to take along on the hazardous journey.

“We’ve finished him,” Bernie called loudly from a short distance away.

The dark ice-laden sky kept the elves’ approach hidden until three medium-sized snowballs rolled into view. Quickly, two of the snowballs were placed on top of the third, forming a snowman. Coal eyes were added. Then, a carrot nose and a button smile finished the newly-created friend’s features.

“This is no time for play,” Mrs. Claus warned.

“They aren’t playing, Martha,” Nicholas hugged her before tossing the bowler hat to Bernie.

“They made a snowman,” she pointed out.

“Yes,” Santa agreed. “And the hat will keep us all on track.”

“Jack made that for you,” Mrs. Claus disagreed.

“Wait and see,” the good saint grinned.

Everyone gasped as the bowler hat was set in place on the snowman’s head. It was a perfect fit. And as he came to life, the snowman lit up from within, shedding a warm friendly glow in the night.

“Frosty friend,” Santa pointed to the head of the sleigh. “You will ride on Rudolph tonight.”

The reindeer shook slightly at the cold touch of the snowman’s weight. But after a momentary adjustment of the reins, they were ready for flight.

“This is your other rider?” Martha’s eyes widened at the thought.

“The snowman will be an ice shield for us,” Nicholas explained. “As we get airborne, he will absorb the ice coming at us.”

“Won’t that be a bit heavy for Rudolph to bear?” Mrs. Claus wondered.

“Not with that glowing nose,” the red suited man raised his hand and shook the reins for





departure. "I think the heat from Rudolph's nose will melt exactly the same amount of ice absorbed by the snowman. So the weight will be the same... coming and going."

"Safe journeys then, my love," she replied as the sleigh moved steadily forward into the sky.

"Merry Christmas, darling," Santa blew her a kiss in return.

As her smile disappeared in the distance, Nicholas felt her love grow stronger within him. Once again, a North Pole neighbor had shown them a way through nature's fury. And their new bond of friendship with the snowman would grow to touch all children holding Christmas in their hearts.





SANTA AND THE SNOW KITTEN

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 1999

Smoke curled from the stone chimney overlooking an ice-covered valley. Work had already begun for the year's newest batch of toys. And Santa's unmistakeable grin broadened as Martha entered the work room.

"Dinner will be ready shortly," she said softly. Her eyes twinkled over gold-rimmed glasses. "Thought you might like some company."

"With all these elves?" Nicholas smiled. "Where would I find time to be lonely?"

He patted the seat beside him. Obviously, his lovely wife had things in complete control for the evening. But the good saint had a sneaking suspicion no nightly feast was the real reason for her visit. Another moment of waiting as she seated herself proved him correct. Two small blue eyes buried in a handful of white fur peered curiously from her folded arms.

"Now, my dear, where did you find a kitten so far north?" his tone conveyed concern for the helpless creature she held. There was no limit to her compassion, he thought. Watching his wife's maternal instincts surface, he knew what was coming.

"It showed up on the doorstep a little while ago," Martha explained. "I hadn't the heart to turn it back to the cold."

"A wise decision, my love," Santa patted the new visitor's head thoughtfully. "There's always room for a generous heart's wish here."

"I told her our home welcomes all travelers," Mrs. Claus agreed. Her face glowed in the firelight.

"Indeed it does," Santa cautioned her. "Just don't get too attached to having her around."

"Nicholas," Martha's eyes widened in surprise. "You've seen her before?"

"Not this color perhaps," he smiled back. "But yes, this particular kitten and I go back a long ways."

As if in reply, the bundle of fur leapt from the comfort of Martha's arms for Santa's lap. Snuggling down closely, it began purring. As if settling in for a long winter's nap. Strangely enough, when Mrs. Claus looked again at the small creature, its fur had changed color from snowy white to a brightly patched calico.

"Why, Nicholas," the cat spoke, grinning up at the good saint. "She seems surprised."

"A talking kitten?" Martha asked.

Echoing the turn of events in her voice, Mrs. Claus sank back into her chair.

"Now, my dear," Nicholas patted his wife's knee reassuringly. "Animals speak all the time to the good of heart. But settle yourself. And I'll tell you this little one's story."





* * *

A long time ago on a very cold Christmas Eve, a woodcutter's daughter named Heather got lost in the forest. Snow had fallen earlier that morning and she'd gone out to play, against her mother's better wishes. But living off in the woods, away from other children her own age, Heather was very lonely. Instead of being sad over her lack of friends, she chose a wonderful way to escape. Her imagination filled the forest with friends of every description. Small bugs and insects were scouts to lead her through overgrown paths. Birds sang, sweetening her journeys, no matter how long or far.

But in the winter when all else slept, Heather had no playmates. Household chores seemed endless. Willingly, she helped her mother and father keep their small cottage tidy and warm. Yet she longed for a playmate. And on that particular day, grey, snow-laden clouds covered everything in sight.

With energy for a dozen children, she ran down new paths, carved in the wind-swept forest. Sparkling ice clung to every tree branch. Afternoon sun rays zigzagged and danced between them. Ahead of her every step.

Being alone in the wintry playworld had never bothered her before. Yet knowing tomorrow she'd awaken with a handful of fruit to celebrate Christmas brought a tear to her eye.

"I wish I had someone to share the holiday with," Heather spoke softly to herself.

"Oh, you do!" a tiny voice called from above.

As she looked up in wonderment, a slight rustling caught her vision. High in the tall fir tree, a small white kitten smiled back at her.

"Who are you?" Heather cried to the visitor. "And how did you get so far up in those branches?"

As if ignoring her, the kitten yawned and moved still higher among the branches. Heather stood staring in stunned silence. Several moments passed before the animal spoke again.

"My name is Snowball and I can go higher!"

"I see that," Heather called back. "But what are you running from? There's no one here to hurt you."

Snowball looked down at the little girl. Playfully, the kitten brushed her tail against the top branches. Sending a flurry of flakes to cover Heather's cap and scarf.

"Hey, that's enough!" Heather responded, knocking the loose snow from her head and clothes. Silently, she watched her new-found friend as the kitten skillfully scampered through the branches.

"Oh, but that's what I do best," Snowball laughed quietly. "Whenever someone walks under a





tree. I clear the snow off overhead branches, then I scamper away too quick for anyone to see."

"It doesn't sound very nice," Heather pointed out. "But I guess it would be fun to be that high off the ground."

"And out of sight for the most part," the impish kitten said, darting first one way then another as she kept an eye on Heather.

But another moment brought a cracking branch tumbling against the kitten's head. Snowball's small breath broke into a gasp as she tumbled out of the tree. Landing at Heather's feet.

"Are you all right?" the little girl asked, brushing away a mound of snow from the kitten.

Snowball's eyes fluttered open. But she couldn't make a sound. Springing swiftly to her feet, the little kitten clawed helplessly at the ice covered ground. Frantically pawing frozen leaves and pine needles in every direction.

"You can't breathe!" Heather screamed.

Snowball nodded back her silent agreement. In her fear, Heather lifted the shocked animal and gave her a quick gentle hug. The forced contraction started Snowball coughing, beginning her lungs' normal respiration again.

"Thank you," the kitten finally managed to gasp. "The fall really took my breath away."

"You shouldn't have climbed so high," Heather pointed out.

"If you don't climb," Snowball replied, "You miss the view at the top."

Heather pulled Snowball closer and hugged her again.

"Yes, but you shouldn't worry people so," she added. "Especially when they care about you."

"Oh, no one cares about me," Snowball disagreed.

"What about friends and family?" Heather returned.

"Don't have any," the kitten admitted, "and never needed them."

"You always need friends and family," Heather smiled at her new friend.

"Why?" Snowball's eyes reflected snowflakes glittering around them.

"With family you enjoy the good times and endure the bad ones."

"And what about friends?" Snowball asked quietly. "Why are they so important?"

Several moments passed before Heather managed to answer.

"That's really difficult," the little girl admitted. "Friends are like family when they know you, and often closer when they need you."

"Exactly right," the kitten agreed.

As if in its own response, a cold chill swept through the trees. Heather shivered and clutched Snowball tighter.

"They're probably looking for me," Heather pointed to a small steady stream of smoke in the





distance. "But how will I find a path in this snow?"

"Maybe you won't have to," Snowball replied. "Your father is already looking for you. All we have to do is give him a little help."

"And how do you know that?" the little girl asked, trying to peer into the darkness. "I can't see a thing."

"Wait and see," Snowball called back, once more scampering up the tree.

Heather watched as the kitten whisked first one way, then another through the overhead branches. In mere minutes, snowflakes swirled into place from surrounding trees and covered the tall fir in front of Heather.

"You're making a marker from the other evergreens!" she grinned up at the swiftly moving Snowball. "But it's too dark, father will never see it."

"Remember when you wished you had someone to share Christmas with?" the kitten reminded her. "Well, you do. All your woodland friends are here. They're just asleep. But I bet a few would wake up to help you get back home."

A sharp cry from Snowball's throat caught Heather unaware and she backed up against a nearby evergreen. Glancing upward, a flowing stream of fireflies quickly emerged from hibernation and trailed a path into the snow-covered tips of the bigger evergreen. Settling on separate branches, the fir tree became a twinkling mass of light against the night sky.

"It's beautiful," Heather gasped in wonder. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Not finished yet," Snowball pointed to a faintly glowing swirl of snowflakes as a familiar red-suited saint appeared.

"Santa Claus!" she cried as her smile greeted him warmly in the frost-laden forest.

"Yes, Heather, it's me," Nicholas grinned back, taking her small hands and warming them in his mittens.

"You know my name," she whispered.

Her eyes glowed as big as saucers as he pointed to the huge tree glittering in the soft glow of a million fireflies.

"Well, isn't this the prettiest tree in the woods tonight?" Nicholas asked and waited. Wondering if she would speak again.

"Oh, it is, Santa," Heather agreed. "My friends decorated it for me. So my father could find me in the snow."

"Your Father in Heaven already knows where you are, Heather," Santa reminded her gently. "But your father here on earth might need a bit more help in locating you. That's why I came."

"You can take me right home, can't you?" Heather asked confidently.





“It does lie in my power,” he admitted quickly. “But you could have walked home on your own as well.”

“Or gotten lost,” she pointed out.

“Or found a new friend,” Santa continued. “A friend who cares about you. Watches over you. Even helps protect you in the darkest nights.”

“You mean Snowball and the fireflies?” Heather grinned.

“They’re definitely important ones to have,” Nicholas moved closer to the tree and laid a finger aside of his nose. “But there’s someone else a lot closer and dearer.”

“You, Santa?” the little girl’s expression of wonder drew a final answer from the saint as he began to glow.

“Not me, Heather,” he pointed upward to the very top of the tree and beyond. “The child this night remembers every Christmas Eve.”

The sparkling flash of light that twinkled in his eyes grew larger as Santa vanished and a lone star descended from the cold night sky. It came to rest at the very top of the snow-laden fir tree.

Starlight joined the fireflies’ glow against Heather’s face as her father appeared at the edge of the clearing. Concern etched across his rugged face vanished as she ran into his arms.

“Papa!” Heather cried in joy.

“My daughter,” he replied, holding her close. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, hugging him tightly.

“Weren’t you afraid in the dark out here all alone?” the woodcutter asked.

“No, Papa,” Heather smiled. “I had this wonderful tree to remind me of all my friends. Who are never far away in my heart. And the greatest one born years ago this very night.”

He lifted her to his shoulders and together they watched the glittering tree for several moments. Then heading for home, Heather glanced back at the soft snow kitten cradled by the fir tree. A single tear fell against her cheek at the thought of leaving her new friend behind. But Snowball smiled and bounded happily back into the overhead branches. Content they would meet again.

* * *

Santa sighed and leaned back in his chair. The crackling fire warmed his toes. Martha slowly rose and brought him a worn, but brightly polished pair of black boots. Snowball lay curled in the hollow of his arm. The kitten barely moved as Mrs. Claus began buckling each shoe’s large gold clasp.

“That was a lovely story, Nicholas,” Martha said, patting her husband’s snow white hair. “Someday someone will read all about your adventures and see themselves in the stories.”





“As long as children dream,” Nicholas agreed. “And hold hope in their hearts. I’ll be there to remind them of their best friend’s birthday every Christmas Eve.”





SANTA AND THE SLEIGH BELLS

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 2000

Santa's bright eyes beamed as Charlotte, his smallest elf, held out two large leather reins of sleigh bells. The workshop gleamed from top to bottom after a full day's worth of cleaning. Now, all that remained was to harness the reindeer. Preparing for the Christmas Eve journey into December's dark sky.

"Excellent work!" Nicholas congratulated the little worker. Her grin broke into a wide smile at praise from the good saint. "Looks like my friend the North Wind will be helping out as usual this evening."

A puzzled glance crossed Charlotte's face as the merry tones of the bells rang in Santa's hand. Noting her look of concern, he paused a moment. Then seated himself in a large leather recliner, beside his wife's green velvet rocking chair.

"Sit here, Charlotte," Nicholas spoke quietly. Pointing to the opposite seat. "What's bothering you?"

The elf bowed low, then climbed up into the heavily cushioned rocker. After a few seconds of settling in, she managed to find her voice. Being extremely shy, it wasn't easy for her to speak with Santa.

"I was wondering about the bells," she whispered. "Where did you find so many of them for the reins?"

"That, my dear," Santa replied, pulling out his well-worn pipe, "is a very special story. And I think we have just enough time to tell it."

Charlotte settled back into the chair's deep cushions as crackling logs in the fireplace grew quiet. Waiting for Nicholas to begin his story.

* * *

A long time ago, in the shadow of a great mountain range, there lived a young girl named Melodee. All through the spring, summer and fall months she was happy and cheerful. Running out to play every day with her younger brother, Marcus, until winter arrived.

Then, both children remained indoors, away from the cold frigid air that blew through their village. For a few years earlier, Marcus had wandered off into the snow one winter's day. Staying too long outside, he grew sick and infection spread quickly to his ears. He lost his hearing. Yet, being so young he grew accustomed to the loss. And Melodee never left his side. Teaching him to appreciate all the wonderful colors and scents that bordered each day in the mountain village.

Still, as every late fall afternoon sent flurries of frostbitten leaves to the ground, their time



outside grew shorter. They knew several months lay ahead before the freedom of spring would come again. So early one winter morning, they gathered a basket of small pinecones for treasure to be hidden away. Hours could be spent decorating the woodland treats for Christmas Eve. No bought gift, even if they had money, could replace each child's wonderful imagination in brightening their parents' hearts.

Marcus quickly collected a small pinecone fortune before sitting down to wait for Melodee. Finishing her collection always took longer than he liked. That afternoon, though, Melodee forgot the most precious treasure by her side. Snow began swirling. Growing thicker by the minute. Soon, her basket of pinecones was completely covered by frosty ice.

The winter wonderland glistened in all directions. Looking up, she saw no sign of Marcus anywhere. Panic-stricken, Melodee carefully began retracing her steps. With no luck. The path had been completely covered by the blowing winter blanket of snow.

"Please help me find Marcus," she prayed silently. "He's all alone and he can't hear me call him."

Just then, a sparkling shimmer of white light beamed directly in front of her. Frightened, Melodee closed her eyes. Then the kindest voice she'd ever heard spoke quietly beside her.

"Child, what are you doing in the woods at this late hour?"

Peeking slightly between her fingers, she saw a jolly red fur-suited man staring back. His eyes twinkled with compassion for the lost little girl.

"Santa Claus!" Melodee exclaimed. "I'm so glad you're here. My brother Marcus is somewhere nearby. But I can't find him."

"Then call to him," Nicholas replied, watching her smile fade.

"He can't hear me, Santa," she cried. "He can't hear anything."

The good saint hugged her close. Drawing her inside an enormous thick cape that Mrs. Claus always insisted he carry to stay warm.

"Now, Melodee," he insisted. "Love can be felt in your heart. And that's louder than any sound on earth."

"You're right," she agreed quickly. "But I don't know which path to take. I'd give every pinecone I've ever collected to find him."

Santa smiled back as she held forth her basket. Knowing the forest treasures were all she had to offer, he tapped a finger aside of his nose. The bottom of her basket immediately opened. Spilling pinecones everywhere. Melodee began to cry as her valued collection rolled off in the snow.

Then, only an instant later, the basket re-wove itself into a long strip. Pinecones leapt into





place, measured distances along its length. Santa's fingers molded each cone into a rounder shape, leaving pieces inside to rattle freely.

"Use this," Nicholas said, handing her the strip of pinecones. "And the love in your heart to find Marcus."

"Thank you, Santa" she whispered as he vanished in a swirling burst of warm light.

Holding the wooden forest bells in her hand, Melodee shook them gently. The strange, clopping sound suddenly changed. A pure ringing tone took its place.

She glanced down to see a string of small silver bells had replaced the pinecones. The next minute, Marcus yelled a short distance away.

Tears of joy filled her eyes as Melodee hurried to find him. She heard the gift of Christmas in her heart that night when both children safely reached home.

* * *

"So that's how the sleigh bells were made," Charlotte grinned in the firelight.

"Yes, little one," Nicholas replied, rising to begin his journeys.

The small elf jumped to the floor. Ready to help load the sleigh. Then paused as a final thought crossed her mind.

"Did Marcus ever hear again?" she asked hesitantly.

"Only the sleigh bells," Santa said, patting her shoulder comfortingly, "And the love that rings from them all over the world every Christmas Eve."





SANTA AND THE FIRE ENGINE

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 2001

Snowflakes melted against each other on the large toy story window as shoppers hurried past outside. Intersecting sidewalks stayed tightly packed by the crush of Christmas footsteps this late in the season. Especially downtown in the city.

Jeffrey Granger's wide blue eyes danced briefly over the window display before refocusing on his new mother's hand. Tugging him toward the store entrance, the six-year-old offered no resistance.

"Come on, honey," the young woman encouraged him. "We can pick out at least one toy this year for Santa to deliver."

The little boy's shoulders shrugged in reply. Any excitement over the holiday was gone. Vanishing just as quickly as his real parents did in the collapse of two high rise business towers on September 11, 2001. He hadn't spoken a word since. Holding his tongue as easily as the pain inside.

He appreciated Donna Franklin's efforts to welcome him into her home. David, her husband, had even suggested the toy store trip to bring them closer together. Even though neither adult actually believed in celebrating the holiday, both adults recognized the need for healing to begin somewhere in the boy's life.

Inside the brightly-lit store every conceivable shape and size of toy gleamed in bright anticipation of being sold to some lucky child. Jeffrey moved through each of the five aisles, carefully examining each potential gift. Traditional sets of building blocks shared shelves with modern boxed collections of computer accessories and games.

Donna watched him carefully. Her Social Services background covered years of applying principles to other people's situations. With no guidelines at all to handle the emotional commitment she now felt for Jeffrey. Moving off to the opposite side of the store, she kept a safe distance between them. If he was to reconnect with the spirit of Christmas, it must be done on his own.

As Jeffrey turned down the last corner of shelves, he paused. A hearty laugh greeted him from a familiar red-suited figure, seated at the end of the aisle. Santa waved and eagerly motioned him nearer. The boy turned away but was instantly greeted by the same figure behind him.

"How'd you do that?" Jeffrey's voice cracked as the words escaped his lips. Then amazed, he quickly clamped both hands over his mouth. Afraid of anything else that might follow.

Santa knelt to gently grasp the young boy's shoulders. The red suited man's eyes twinkled





merrily as Jeffrey blinked hard. In an instant, both of them were in a warmly lit cottage, with the icy North Pole wind whistling outside.

"Where are we?" Jeffrey's eyes widened at the marvels surrounding him.

He saw dolls and puzzles, trains and planes, bicycles and sleds, covering the entire room.

"You're at my home, the North Pole," Santa explained gently. "Where I make all the toys for children around the world."

Jeffrey let out a gasp as a small red fire engine drove into view. It stopped directly at his feet.

Cautiously, he knelt to examine the marvelous toy.

"None of this is real," the boy shook his head in disbelief. "I'm still in the toy store downtown. This is some kind of trick."

"Is it?" the red suited saint replied. "Look outside, then tell me what you believe."

Jeffrey dashed to the front window. Tossing aside a thick curtain sash, he saw an ice covered landscape buried in drifting snowflakes. A curtain of rainbow-colored light shimmered overhead.

"It's the Aurora Borealis," "We learned about that in school."

"Yes," Santa nodded. "School teaches many things. But sometimes, other lessons prove more valuable."

Jeffrey turned and noticed Santa's eyes were now watching the crackling logs in the fireplace. The white-haired elf motioned for the boy to have a seat in a green velvet lined chair directly across from him. Once seated, Santa and his new friend smiled at each other, before the saint continued.

"You liked this fire engine when you first saw it, didn't you?" Santa asked, holding the mechanical toy in his hands. Pushing a button, its ladder extended and a small fireman figure, hidden inside the engine, began climbing upward.

Jeffrey's attention was instantly focused on the little plastic man. Once at the top, it stopped, head turning from side to side, then slowly descended back into the engine.

"That's neat," the boy grinned. "just like a real fireman!"

"This one works fine," Santa admitted. Then reached into a sack of toys by his feet. Another fire engine popped into view, but the ladder was broken, extending only halfway. Still, as Jeffrey watched, the plastic fireman climbed out of the engine to the ladder's middle, looked around, then descended again.

"That one doesn't work so well," he pointed out. "Who would want that?"

"There are a lot of children in the world who would be very happy to get it," Santa smiled. "You see, they don't judge its worth by looks or how it works. They're just glad someone remembered them at Christmas."





"My parents used to get me lots of gifts," Jeffrey's smile faded. "That won't happen anymore."

"Perhaps their greatest gift isn't the sort you can wrap up and hide for Christmas Day," Santa explained. "Maybe their gift lasts all year long."

The boy studied the red-suited man's face carefully for a moment. Then he ran to jump into Santa's lap.

"You are real!" Jeffrey's grin reappeared. "Because you couldn't feel what I do unless..."

"Yes, Jeffrey," Santa hugged him tightly. "I'm an orphan, too. My parents were very poor and couldn't afford to buy gifts when I was small. But they were wonderful bakers and gave cookies as presents."

"That's why everybody leaves you cookies and milk every year," the boy's eyes widened in surprise.

"Exactly," the red-suited elf's eyes twinkled once again and they were back in the small downtown toy store. "Now go find your new mother and pick out a toy. She loves you very much."

"Thanks, Santa," Jeffrey replied. "I've already picked my toy."

Holding the broken fire engine tightly in his hands, Jeffrey rejoined Donna to head for the checkout line. He didn't speak a word until he noticed a barrel outside labeled toys for needy children.

"What is it, Jeffrey?" Donna asked as he stopped on the snow-covered sidewalk.

He reached into the store bag and drew the little broken fire engine out. When he began speaking, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"My parents always taught me to share," Jeffrey explained. "and now I have new parents to teach me more. I already know you really care about me. Maybe another little boy or girl out there will know somebody else cares if I give them my fire engine."

He put the broken toy carefully inside the barrel, then grabbed Donna's hand snugly.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," Jeffrey said softly.

"Merry Christmas, Jeffrey," Donna smiled back through her tears.

Overhead, they heard the sound of hoofbeats leaving the store's rooftop. Glancing up, both mother and son saw a red-suited man in the swirling wind of snowflakes.

"I won't forget the cookies either, Santa!" Jeffrey whispered.

"Merry Christmas!" Santa called back as Rudolph guided the sleigh and reindeer into the sky.

"And to all a good night!"





SANTA AND THE SNOWBIRDS

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 2002

Snow quickly covered the little elf's footprints as he reached the front door of Santa's workshop. His breath hit the icy swirling wind and blew away swiftly as his little voice echoed quietly in the night air.

"He's the only one who would know the answer to my question," the small visitor repeated to himself.

Knocking twice, he watched snowflakes circling around the warm cheery home. It had been here as long as he could remember, but in all that time no one had ever asked his question of the man living inside. And the answer would definitely decide whether the little elf stayed or left the only home he'd ever known.

As the door opened, Santa's beaming smile glanced down at the small visitor.

"Good evening, Darrel," Nicholas greeted him. "Are the toys ready to deliver tonight? It's Christmas Eve, you know!"

"No, Santa," the little elf replied. "Not yet."

"Have a seat, then," the good saint replied, pointing to a large armchair by the fireplace.

Crackling logs lit the entire room, keeping everything toasty warm.

"Along with cookies and milk, of course," Santa said, grinning.

He placed a plate of ginger cookies and a tall glass of milk on a small table beside the chair.

"Thanks, Santa," Darrel continued, "but I just wanted to know one thing. And none of the other elves could tell me."

"And what would that be?" Nicholas asked, seating himself.

The little elf paused a moment, looking around nervously. Then he drew a deep breath, releasing it in almost a whisper.

"Why aren't there any children at the North Pole?" he asked, matter-of-factly. "We make all of these wonderful toys and gifts, but children aren't here to enjoy them."

"Good question," Santa responded, grinning quietly to himself. "Let me tell you about a little girl named Nell."

"Did she live here?" Darrel asked quickly as he reached for another cookie and sip of milk.

"Not exactly," Nicholas replied, thinking back slowly. "She lived far from here when she was born. But was always near in her heart."

* * *

A long, long time ago in a small village, there lived a darling little girl named Nell. Her parents





were very poor and couldn't afford many of the things other parents give their children. But Nell never minded that. She was just happy to be part of a loving and warm family. A lot of children never think about how important it is to have parents who love and care for them. So, you should always love your mom and dad all year round. And little Nell did just that, because she depended on her parents for everything.

For you see, as a baby, Nell was sick awhile, and then she could never walk again. Looking out from her bedroom window every day, Nell would sit and patiently watch other children having fun. She never complained about having to crawl from one end of her bed to the other. Or never having any visitors. It seemed that no one cared for the little girl except her parents. And they did the best they could to ease her loneliness with homemade gifts and toys.

Yet Nell had a wish that she never told anyone, not even her parents. The greatest gift in the whole wide world would be a real live bird for a pet. She loved to watch them soar way up in the sky and then land ever so gently on her windowsill. And she kept scraps of food from her meals hidden in her pillow to feed them. Every morning when her father went off to work, and her mother busily tidied up the cottage, she opened her window just a crack. Shoving food crumbs outside to the eager hungry birds delighted her.

But one special Christmas Eve, little Nell had to reveal her secret wish. A small robin had arrived just that afternoon. Landing on her windowsill for only a moment before falling into snow-covered bushes below. Nell struggled with the window to open it further and make sure the little bird was okay. She tried and tried, but the window simply wouldn't budge another inch.

"What can I do?" she cried. "If I tell Mom about the robin, she's bound to know I've been feeding them all along. Then, I won't get any more scraps and my birds won't come back. I'll be all alone with no friends. And if I don't tell Mom, I can't help the one that fell into the bushes."

Nell thought quickly and whispered a very special Christmas promise for her little friend.

"Please, Santa," she said quietly to herself. "I know I've wished for a pet for a long time. Almost as long as I can remember. But I know now that I can't have one. I can't take care of a bird when I need other people to care for me. Still, I want the little robin to be okay outside."

Nell paused as a tear rolled down her cheek. Bravely brushing it aside, she looked out at the gathering snow and blowing winds on the other side of her windowpane.

"I promise ... I'll never ask for a pet again," she continued, clasping her hands together, "just help the little snowbird fly."

At that, sparkles of glowing red light appeared in her room. Nell blinked hard and saw Santa smiling back at her.

"You heard me," she cried. "I knew you would!"





“Yes, my child,” Nicholas replied. “I’ve heard you many times over the years when you recited your dearest wish at bedtime. Now, it seems, you’d give up that wish to help a single snowbird survive.”

“I didn’t have anything else to offer,” Nell replied. “We’re poor, and I can’t walk or do things like other children.”

Santa pointed to the windowsill and Nell turned to see the little bird hopping merrily back and forth, waiting for food.

“Thanks, Santa,” the child smiled back.

“You’re quite welcome,” Nicholas acknowledged the girl’s gratefulness. He pondered hard, then reached to hug her close for a moment.

“Nell, you don’t have to do what other children do,” the good saint explained gently. “You have your own special gifts to share. And they don’t need to be spent in play. As you get older, you’ll find the greatest good is in helping others. Young or old, big or small, human or animal, everything in God’s creation matters. How do you think I heard about your wish?”

The little girl’s eyes widened, slowly realizing how important the snowbird had become to her.

“I thought the elves spied and told you everything,” Nell began. “But it was my little friend.”

“That’s right,” Santa laughed softly. “Mrs. Claus’ elves have enough to do just getting the toys ready to deliver tonight. The snowbirds, though, fly every-where and hear everything. When you care for them, I always hear good things about you.”

“Well, I got my wish then,” Nell smiled back. “And that’s enough for me.”

“Oh no, my dear,” Nicholas said, his eyes twinkling merrily. “You’re much too young to stop wishing for good things to happen. But old enough to know that life sometimes delays them for a reason.”

Nell shifted uneasily on her small bed. Her legs began to twitch slightly, then as she glanced down, her toes wiggled.

“Santa!” she yelled. “I can feel my legs.”

“Yes, Nell,” the good saint replied. “God’s Son heard your prayer tonight as well.”

“I can walk?” she asked, scared to believe the miracle.

“Forever,” Santa patted her head. “And when you’re older, there’s a place for you at the North Pole. I think we need someone to care for snowbirds all year round.”

“Thank you always,” Nell replied, her eyes sparkling in wonder.

“I’ll thank you in a few years,” Nicholas nodded back, laying a finger beside his nose. “When you’ve learned all life has to teach in giving, then you’ll be ready to join us.”





“Merry Christmas, Santa,” Nell waved as he vanished in a warm glow of bright light.

“And to all a good night,” Nicholas’ voice echoed in the small cottage.

* * *

“Do you understand now why there are no children here at the North Pole?” Santa paused, waiting for Darrel’s reply.

The elf scratched his head and grinned. A slight flutter outside the snow-covered windowpane caught his attention.

“Children have a lot to learn about Christmas wishes,” Darrel replied, jumping down from his armchair.

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed. “And very few understand the importance of love in their lives until they’re much older.”

Santa rose as a familiar face appeared at the window. The keeper of the snowbirds smiled and waved. Eager to share the wishes of children all over the world with him. And the warmth of Christmas held forever in her heart.





SANTA AND THE CHRISTMAS FLOWER

by Emmett O. Saunders III
copyright 2003

Sparkles of snowflakes shone briefly on Donner's coat as Santa patted him down outside the North Pole workshop. Days had grown short for this year's schedule of toys. And the elves had already stacked more than two loads on the sleigh, brimming with gifts of every sort.

Still, as the good saint checked his list twice, something tickled his fancy as a hearty laugh escaped his lips.

Inside the warmly-lit cottage a short distance away, a small elf turned from the frosted windowpane.

"What do you think caught his eye?" she asked Mrs. Claus.

Martha smiled as she prepared to pull another large batch of cookies from the oven. "I've heard that laugh only once before. It was quite some time back as I recall. But evidently the little boy didn't forget to write this year."

A quizzical look crossed the elf's shining face as she waited for Mrs. Claus to continue.

"All right, then," the good-hearted woman replied, sitting down next to the room's cheerily-lit fireplace. "We can rest a moment while the next batch of cookies heats. Let me see if I remember when Santa first met him."

A very long time ago there lived a young boy named Simon. He grew up in a small village on the side of a great mountain. Every day Simon would travel a narrow path to the top of the mountain. Gathering bunches of wildflowers to sell to the townspeople below. It was a hard life in terms of getting money together to make ends meet. But fellow villagers never seemed to mind parting with scarce funds for the flowers. They knew Simon needed everything he could make to help his mother who sold home-made jams and jellies for a living at the marketplace.

Luckily, the surrounding countryside's beauty was always welcomed into the villager's homes no matter the season. More so, perhaps, at Christmas because of who the holiday truly brought into their lives.

One year, though, a cold icy wind blew across the mountaintop just hours before Christmas Eve. Winter's frosty fingers froze everything in sight. Simon, surrounded in snowflakes, almost lost his way twice coming down the trail. Empty-handed, he met his mother at her regular market stall.

"No luck today," he said shivering in the cold.

"Maybe you should consider another line of work?" she smiled back. "That mountain can be



very dangerous. And I worry when you're not safe at home on nights like this."

The boy hugged her tightly. Ever since his father had passed away years ago, Simon felt responsible for his mother's care. Being just a small lad, he wasn't capable of doing big things to help her out. But the few extra dollars that he did manage to provide, usually meant a nice hot meal for Christmas dinner. The storm's growing fury now put that hope in jeopardy.

"Don't worry, Mother," Simon replied. "I'll get a fresh start in the morning."

"If it's like this tomorrow," his mother warned, "no one will be going anywhere for quite some time."

At dawn, Simon dressed quietly and left home for the mountain trail. Ice forced him to step slowly, but didn't discourage the boy's resolve to find flowers that had somehow managed to escape the wrath of winter.

Yet, on that particular Christmas Eve, the higher he climbed, the more treacherous the trail became. Until at last his foot slipped and lodged between two rocks. Unable to free himself, he called for help a long time. But being so near the top of the mountain, no one heard him. And snow began to fall once again in the whirling frosty air.

"What am I going to do?" he thought to himself. "No one knows I'm up here, except..."

Then Simon paused, realizing his mother would be the only one who knew. Would she try climbing the trail herself to find him? And if she did, how would they get back down the mountain in the brewing snowstorm? By ignoring her concern from last night, he had put them both at risk.

"All I wanted was a flower so we could eat a Christmas dinner," he yelled out against the wailing wind. "Is that too much to wish?"

"Not at all," a voice sounded in front of him.

Suddenly, a shimmering sparkle of red cloak appeared in the snow. Santa's beaming face warmed the frozen stones enough for Simon to wriggle free.

"My boy, what brings you out in the middle of all this weather?" the good saint asked quietly. The gale-force winds died to only a whisper as Santa spoke.

"I was trying to find flowers so my mother and I could enjoy a meal on Christmas Day," the boy replied.

"So you eat flowers for dinner?" the good saint asked, grinning back.

"No, I sell them and my mother buys food," Simon corrected himself quickly.

"I see," Santa responded. "And how would she feel if she knew you were up here right now?"

"Not too good," the boy admitted. "She told me not to go out in this kind of weather."

Santa helped Simon to his feet. Standing a bit unsteadily, the boy leaned on the saint's arm for





support.

“Do you disobey her often?” the red-suited man asked with a concerned look on his face.

“Oh no,” Simon insisted. “But there’s just the two of us, and she needs me and my flowers to keep things going.”

“Well, that may be true,” Santa replied, “but what good could you do lost in a snowstorm at the top of the mountain?”

“None at all,” the boy agreed.

“Eating is important,” Santa pointed out, “along with the holiday’s festivities. But there’s someone who shouldn’t be forgotten in the middle of everything. The whole reason for the season remains a small child’s birth.”

“I know it’s God’s son,” Simon spoke assuredly. “Without Him, we’d have no life beyond this one.”

“Very true,” Santa smiled. “And the beauty of the mountain is just a part of what lies beyond its limits.”

Simon silently wiped a tear away.

“My dad told me that.”

“I know,” the good saint said, walking a short ways with him. “Good feelings inside grow stronger outside. Now, you’d better get home before this storm gets any worse.”

Simon nodded. He knew Santa was right. And he also knew that he needed to find his mother safe at home and not out looking for him.

“I guess we won’t have any Christmas dinner,” he sighed. “But at least we’ll be together.”

The good saint laid a finger aside of his nose and instantly a beautiful white flower bloomed in the snow. Its leaves spread in an ever-widening pattern as Santa picked and placed the bloom in Simon’s hands.

“Don’t worry about your dinner,” the red-suited man assured him. “This will be more than enough to provide that. Remember, the flower’s beauty inside reflects in its outward growth.”

“Thanks, Santa,” the boy hugged his benefactor as the good saint vanished in a shower of red sparkling snow.

Simon hurried down the mountain as best he could through the storm, being careful to keep the flower safe in his arms. It was growing dark as he approached his house and saw no lights burned inside.

“Please, God,” he whispered. “Let my mother be home.”

Inside, there was no sign of her anywhere. And as he ventured back out into the cold, only the





lights from the village church burned brightly as a beacon through the snow. Heading to the warm sanctuary, Simon asked everyone he passed when his mother had last been seen. No one knew or could say for certain and he finally collapsed sobbing on the steps outside.

“I’ll never find my mother in this storm,” he cried. “It’s impossible by myself.”

A sudden touch on his shoulder and a calm voice drew him to his feet.

“But nothing’s impossible with God,” his mother’s eyes filled with tears as she clasped him close. “I knew my prayers would be answered. That’s why I came here.”

Simon’s despair immediately vanished as he hugged her tightly. There could have been no greater Christmas present for him this year than having her safe and sound.

“Mother, I will never disobey you again,” he promised solemnly. “You don’t know how scared I was that you were lost forever.”

“No more than you, my son,” she replied. “When things get beyond me, I put it all in God’s hands. Never forget that.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “I won’t ever forget.”

As they finally released each other, Simon remembered the flower that still lay in his arms. Looking down, he saw the fragrant leaves totally crushed from the embrace.

“What was this?” his mother asked curiously.

“A magnificent white flower that bloomed in the snow,” he replied.

“How is that possible?” she wondered.

“It was a gift,” he spoke quietly, yet steadily. “From Santa, so we could have a Christmas dinner tomorrow. Now, no one will buy the poor flower, looking like this.”

But a sudden gleam from inside the church caught his eye. Simon rose and began walking down the aisle with the withered flower. His mother watched him with pride. Somehow knowing he’d found a use for the flower despite its condition. Stopping at the manger scene, the young boy stared at the even younger child lying asleep in the crib. He laid the remains of the white flower in the small clasped hands of the Christ child figure. Everyone in the church stood staring at the gesture of welcome for the newborn infant.

Instantly, the flower’s petals began glowing pink with newfound life. Spreading out, they turned a rosy red as Simon’s eyes widened in amazement.

“Where did you find such a flower?” everyone began to ask. “You must tell us.”

“Better still,” a young wife said earnestly, “you and your mother must come to our house tomorrow for dinner. My husband and I have plenty to eat, and more than enough to share. We’d gladly exchange a decent meal for wonderful friendship and conversation. No one should be alone on Christmas.”





Simon nodded in silent agreement as his mother joined him. He knew this visit from Santa meant they'd never be alone, ever again.

"So that's why we always decorate with poinsettias," the young elf said as Mrs. Claus rose to check on the baked goodies cooking merrily inside her oven.

"Yes, my dear," Martha replied, looking out at the whirl of snowflakes outside.

Her eyes were drawn to the familiar red-suited figure happily stuffing a sleigh full of toys.

"Christmas wouldn't be the same without flowers or decorations," the little elf noted, smiling at the good-hearted woman.

"You're right," Mrs. Claus grinned back. "Because they remind us to keep the love and hope that God's Son brought into this world growing stronger every Christmas."





SANTA AND THE CHRISTMAS WREATH

by Emmett O. Saunders III

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Sharp bright embers flared briefly as they sparked through the North Pole's cold night sky. Inside Santa's warmly-lit cottage, two elves shivered nervously despite the heat from logs crackling merrily in the huge stone fireplace.

"What do you think will happen?" Ingrid whispered to her brother. "Christmas is only a week away, and you know he doesn't like secrets."

"I know," Friedrich replied. "We may as well tell him."

Ingrid shifted first one foot, then the other in front of her. Pale strawberry-blonde hair fell in ringlets through her fingers as she twirled it and glanced outside. It remained a worry habit that she had never outgrown from her childhood centuries ago.

"How can we explain why Blitzen is missing?" she asked with tears welling up. "He's been gone two days. And we've all looked everywhere for him."

"Except Santa," Friedrich pointed to the door as it opened and a familiar smiling face appeared. "He will know."

The good-hearted saint gently set his almost-filled sack full of toys in a far corner of the room. Away from any direct fireplace heat.

"Know what?" Nicholas asked, glancing curiously at the waiting elves. "And why aren't you two helping the other elves get my reindeer fed and watered for the evening?"

At that, the little girl elf burst into tears. Running to bury her face in the soft cushiony comfort of Santa's red and white suit.

"Oh, Santa," Ingrid cried. "Blitzen's gone. We don't know where."

"Gone for two days," Friedrich chimed in. "And with Christmas only a week away!"

"Now, now," the humble saint replied, trying to quietly calm them. "We mustn't go jumping to conclusions. He probably has a very good reason for his absence."

Ingrid searched the old man's face for any explanation. She couldn't bear the thought of a lost reindeer wandering alone in the wilderness surrounding them.

"He's not alone," Santa assured her.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" she asked wonderingly.

"My dear elf, the same way I know what everyone needs each Christmas," Nicholas





chuckled heartily. "Now, let's go see what Blitzen's been up to."

"You already knew," Friedrich grinned at the saint. Relieved by the thought that the reindeer was safe.

"I know where he's located," Santa replied. "But it may be up to both of you to bring him back safely."

Nicholas smiled broadly and laid a finger aside his nose as they vanished in a flurry of snowflakes and sparkling crystals.

Ingrid and Friedrich blinked twice as a small village appeared before their eyes. Most of the roads were covered in densely packed snow, crunching noisily as townspeople hurried from one building to the next.

"What are they doing?" Ingrid asked. Bemused by the stream of people seemingly aimless in their treks through the village.

"Shopping, my dear. They are the ones who hold the season's festivities in spirit, but sometimes lack the meaning in their hearts," Santa replied. "Come, we need to find Blitzen and time grows short."

The trio moved quickly and stopped at a small run-down house at the village's outermost limits. A young woman, warmly wrapped but shivering in the brisk December wind, was guiding Blitzen around in a circular clearing in the woods surrounding them.

Drawing nearer, Ingrid and Friedrich could see a small line of children waiting in line for their turn at riding a tiny branch-woven sled, pulled by the reindeer.

"Santa," Ingrid whispered. "She's using Blitzen for rides to make money."

"I see that," Santa agreed.

But before Nicholas could stop them, both elves ran to pull Blitzen away from the woman. Her surprise turned to shock as the children ran hurriedly away from the clearing back to their homes.

"Leave Blitzen alone!" Ingrid yelled, pulling a small set of reins from the woman's hands.

"How did you get him here?" Friedrich joined in. "We always keep close watches on all the reindeer that pull Santa's sleigh."

The young woman, standing totally speechless, dropped to her knees in the snow at Santa's approach.

"My little elves," he cautioned them with a hand on their heads. "She cannot explain."

Friedrich glared spitefully at the woman. She had managed to lure Blitzen from the herd and whisk him to do her bidding in one of the remotest villages at the North Pole. What





explanation could she possibly offer to justify such thievery? Respect for Santa kept the rest of his temper in check for the moment.

The young woman would not raise her eyes from the good saint's boots. She merely pointed in the direction of her drafty little house almost obliterated from view by a fresh sprinkling of snowflakes.

Santa smiled and lifted the woman back to her feet. Together, Nicholas and the elves followed the woman to her house and glanced inside.

There, with only the comfort of a small fireplace and two coals for heat, an infant slept peacefully in a wood-hewn crib. The young woman's eyes pleaded with Santa for understanding and forgiveness.

“She can't speak,” Ingrid said, her eyes widening in remorse.

“She's mute,” Friedrich agreed. “That's why she couldn't tell us anything.”

Santa nodded, drawing both elves and the woman together in a hug.

“Her husband passed away several years ago,” the saint explained. “She could find no other way to provide for the child this year since jobs in the village have all but vanished.”

“So she took Blitzen for this?” Friedrich asked, trying to understand the reason for her theft.

“No,” Nicholas reassured him. “Blitzen saw her plight and wanted to help. He came here willingly.”

“Santa, what can we do to help?” Ingrid broke in. “If we take Blitzen back with us, she will have no way to keep her child warm.”

“That would seem to be a problem,” Santa agreed, leading them back outside. He closed the door gently and stood deep in thought for a moment.

The young woman released her grip on Nicholas' arm and began nimbly moving her fingers in the icy air. Trying in her own way to indicate dexterity in making things.

“She could make toys,” Ingrid remarked. “Her hands are definitely talented in that regard.”

“We have enough elves getting in each other's way at the workshop,” Friedrich reminded her.

“Yes,” Santa agreed. “And she needs to stay here in the comfort of her own home.”

Tugging at Nicholas' sleeve, the young woman led him to the small sled still lying in the snow. Pointing first at herself, then at the toy, she again made a weaving motion with her hands.

“That's it!” Ingrid exclaimed. “She could make sleds for children.”





“Not as quickly as we could with sounder material at the workshop,” Santa pointed out.

A winged motion overhead suddenly caught their attention as a bright cardinal landed in its nest. The young woman began motioning excitedly to Santa.

“Yes,” he assured her. “I see where you got the idea for weaving your sled.”

“How about a bird’s nest?” Friedrich asked. “That would be small enough for a great many decorations.”

“Christmas is much more than mere decoration,” Nicholas gently replied. “Each one gives recognition to the holiday. And reminding us of the meaning ties us to the reverence for the season as well.”

Santa turned to the young woman and hugged her warmly. Then, pointing to the cardinal’s home overhead, he made a blessing sign in the air and several holly trees rattled in unison. With no wind in sight, they began shaking several branches loose which fell in the snow at their feet.

Both elves looked bewildered at each other as the young woman gathered the wood and began swiftly weaving it together in a circular shape. In the twinkling of an eye, the berry-green decoration was complete and she held it up for Santa’s inspection.

“What is it?” Ingrid asked, staring at the wood-woven treasure.

“The first Christmas wreath,” Santa replied.

“What does it mean?” Friedrich wondered aloud.

“A great many things,” Nicholas continued. “The circular path of life. The protection of nature surrounding us. And most importantly, the supreme generosity that lets us share our Savior’s birth on Christmas Day.”

As Santa gathered Blitzen and the elves together, the young woman knelt to form letters in the snow. Ingrid and Friedrich smiled as the words THANK YOU appeared on the frosty ground.

“Merry Christmas, Mary,” Santa waved back as he vanished with helpers and reindeer in the swirling snowflakes. “You’ve given two elves and the whole world a new symbol to celebrate God’s greatest gift.”





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Merry Christmas!